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Written statement submitted by the Baha'i International Community, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[11 January 1999]

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The Baha'i Institute of Higher Education: a creative and peaceful response to religious persecution in Iran

1. Since 1980, as part of a government-directed attempt to destroy the intellectual and cultural life of the 300,000-member Baha'i community, young people who declare their Baha'i identity have been systematically excluded from colleges and universities in Iran.

2. Deeply concerned at seeing an entire generation of its best and brightest languish without the opportunity for higher learning, the Baha'i community of Iran launched a creative and wholly non-violent response: the establishment of its own independent, full-fledged, yet completely decentralized, university system. The New York Times, in an article about the university published on 29 October 1998, called this effort "an elaborate act of communal self-preservation".

3. Founded in 1987, the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education (BIHE) had, until September 1998, an enrolment of more than 900 students, a faculty of more than 150 first-rate academics and instructors, and an "infrastructure" composed of various classrooms, laboratories and libraries scattered throughout Iran in private homes and buildings.

4. As has been widely reported in the international news media, agents of the Government of Iran staged a series of sweeping raids in late September and early October 1998, arresting at least 36 members of the BIHE faculty and staff and confiscating equipment and records located in over 500 homes.

5. As the New York Times noted, "[t]he materials confiscated were neither political nor religious, and the people arrested were not fighters or organizers. They were lecturers in subjects like accounting and dentistry; the materials seized were textbooks and laboratory equipment".

6. Those who were arrested, many of whom have now been released, were asked to sign a document declaring that BIHE had ceased to exist as of 29 September 1998 and that they would no longer cooperate with it. The detainees refused to sign any such declaration.

7. To informed observers, the recent arrests and confiscations are clearly part of a long-standing and centrally orchestrated campaign by the Iranian authorities to deal with the Baha'i community in Iran "in such a way that their progress and development are blocked". This is the stated intent of the policy set forth in a secret 1991 government memorandum that instructed authorities how to deal with "the Baha'i question". The actions against BIHE, likewise, reflect a new and dangerous period for the Baha'i community in Iran. This period was ushered in by the summary execution of Mr. Ruhu'llah Rawhani, a 52-year-old medical supplies salesman who was hanged in Mashhad on 21 July 1998 solely for religious reasons, and the subsequent confirmation of death sentences against two other Baha'is in Mashhad in September.

8. The secret government memorandum, drawn up by the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council in February 1991, was obtained and made public in 1993 by Mr. Reynaldo Galindo Pohl, the Special Representative of the Commission on Human Rights on the situation of human rights in Iran. Signed by Iranian

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the memorandum established a subtle government policy aimed essentially at grinding the community into non-existence by forcing Baha'i children to have a strong Islamic education, pushing Baha'i adults to the economic periphery and forcing them from all positions of power or influence, and requiring Baha'i youth to "be expelled from universities, either in the admission process or during the course of their studies, once it becomes known that they are Baha'is".

Not an "underground" university

9. It would be incorrect to call the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education an "underground university", since its existence was well known to the authorities from its earliest years. In fact, in 1996 the Iranian authorities conducted far-reaching raids against BIHE sites, confiscating records and equipment but not moving to shut down the operation. In keeping with Baha'i religious teachings on obedience to government, the Baha'is in Iran always answered forthrightly questions about the Institute and any other activities when asked. Nevertheless, inasmuch as the Baha'is of Iran have been blocked from operating their institutions freely and normally, they resorted to the concept of running an "open university" that was both highly decentralized and carefully circumspect in its operation.

10. Until the government raids at the end of September 1998, the Institute offered Bachelor's degrees in 10 subject areas: applied chemistry, biology, dental science, pharmacological science, civil engineering, computer science, psychology, law, literature and accounting. And within these subject areas, which were administered by five university "departments", the Institute was able to offer more than 200 distinct courses each term. In the beginning, courses were based on correspondence lessons developed by Indiana University, which was one of the first institutions in the West to recognize the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education. Later on, course offerings were developed internally. The teaching was done principally via correspondence, or, for specialized scientific and technical courses and in other special cases, in small-group classes that were usually held in private homes.

11. "At the beginning, the students did not even know the names of their professors", said one BIHE professor, who, like most others interviewed, wanted to remain anonymous out of fear for his safety and that of his relatives in Iran. Even after three or four years, the students did not know the names of their professors. They had never seen them because it was very dangerous. If somebody knew a professor's name, he or she might tell a friend. So all courses were conducted by correspondence at the beginning of this plan.

12. Over time, however, the Institute was able to establish a few laboratories, operated in privately owned commercial buildings in and around Tehran. These laboratories included a computer science laboratory, a physics laboratory, a dental science laboratory, a pharmacological laboratory, an applied chemistry laboratory and a language study laboratory. The operations of these laboratories were kept prudently quiet, with students cautioned not to come and go in large groups that might give the authorities a reason to object.

An all-volunteer, unpaid faculty

13. At its peak, the Institute had more than 150 faculty members. Approximately 25 or 30 of them were professors who were fired from government-run universities after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Other faculty members included doctors, dentists, lawyers and engineers who gave of their time to teach students. The majority were educated in Iran, but a good number have degrees from universities in the West, including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Columbia University, the University of California at Berkeley and the Sorbonne. None of the Baha'i faculty members were paid for their time; all gave it freely as a form of community service. "These youth are very precious people", said a faculty member, explaining why they were willing to take such risks, without monetary remuneration, to establish the Institute. "We all care about them. They have been through tests and trials and they had no hope. They have been deprived of many things, so if there is any chance for us to get something better for them, we did it."

14. Each of the five departments drew not only on these volunteer professors for their academic expertise but also on a small and anonymous group of Baha'i academics in North America, Europe and Australia. These outside academics sent in the latest textbooks and research papers, occasionally made visits to Iran as guest lecturers, and otherwise provided instructional and technical support. "The Baha'i youth are all raised to want to study and become professionals", said one of the academics involved in supporting the Institute. "So to sit around and do nothing is a very serious psychological pressure. And before the Open University really got going, the youth were in a hopeless position." The academic, who is Iranian born and still has family in Iran, also asked that his name not be used.

High academic standards

15. Entrance examinations were required for BIHE and the Institute established high standards. Of the roughly 1,500 students who applied for admission in its first year of operation, 250 were accepted for the first semester of study. By 1996, a total of 600 students had enrolled in the Baha'i Institute of Higher Education and were pursuing their studies and, by 1998, approximately 900 students were enrolled. One former student, who is now living outside of Iran, likened the attitude of many of the students to Gandhi's attitude of non-violent resistance. Denied the right to an education by the authorities, students were determined to study to show the Government that they could study.

16. Among the indications of the Institute's surprisingly high academic standards and instructional level was the success that a few Institute graduates had in gaining admission to graduate schools outside Iran, including major universities in the United States and Canada. It should be noted, however, that some Institute graduates and students outside Iran have had a difficult time getting their credits recognized. Such challenges, which are a fact of life for Institute graduates, stem directly from the policy of the Government of Iran of blocking their access to education and its refusal to recognize the Institute officially.

17. "In Iran, you have to apply for an examination to go to college", said one former BIHE student, who also asked to remain anonymous. "If you are successful at your exam, you can go to university." The student described the examination form as asking, "What is your religion?" The possible answers listed are "Islam, Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism". When the Baha'i students either didn't write anything or wrote "Baha'i" off to the side, they were not given an entrance card to go to the examination hall. So they couldn't even take the exam."

Complex administration

18. In its day-to-day operation, the Institute functioned basically like a correspondence school, but with its own delivery service. In its early years, students and faculty sent homework assignments and lessons back and forth via the State-run postal system. But the packages often did not arrive and were assumed to have been intercepted as part of the Government's attempt to interfere with Baha'i education.

19. Since professors could not deliver lectures openly, they prepared their own written notes and compiled textbooks for distribution to the students. As noted above, some of these texts were based on the latest Western research. One student of civil engineering, for example, was studying the construction of earthquake-proof earth silos - and the Institute's overseas contacts were able to get for him some of the latest research on this topic from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "Our aim was to offer the best courses available in Iran", said a faculty member. The entire operation relied heavily on the use of extensive photocopying, and one of the biggest blows in the recent raids was the confiscation of several large photocopying units.

20. The Institute system also featured a network of special depository libraries around the country. Numbering more than 45, these libraries existed in the private homes of Baha'is and enabled students in each district to obtain access to the necessary textbooks for the courses. Some of these libraries were seized in the recent raids.

Shutdown

21. Over time, as Institute officials began to feel increasing confidence about their operation, they started to organize many group classes along with independent study in private homes. The Institute also began to publish sophisticated course catalogues, listing not only course offerings but the qualifications of the faculty members. Through the international network of Baha'i communities worldwide, the Institute also began to establish the means by which its graduates might become fully recognized by institutions of higher education outside Iran.

22. It is not clear to the Baha'i community of Iran why the raids and confiscations were launched in late September 1998. Government officials have not been forthcoming with explanations when asked about the actions. According to the New York Times, Iranian officials made no comment when asked about the raids and arrests.

23. Among other significant human rights conventions, Iran is a party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 16 December 1966. Parties to this Covenant recognize "the right of everyone to education" and more specifically that "higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means".

24. The exclusion of Baha'is from access to higher education in Iran certainly constitutes a gross violation of the Covenant. These latest steps taken to shut down the Iranian Baha'i community's creative and peaceful response only increases public outrage regarding the attempt by the Government of Iran to strangulate the Baha'i community.